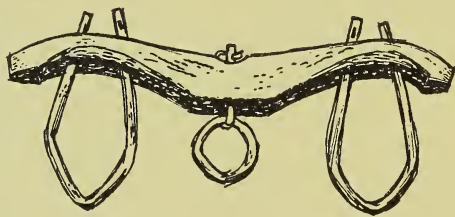


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Lincoln, A
An appreciation of
Thomas Jefferson

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An Appreciation of Thomas Jefferson

By

ABRAHAM LINCOLN





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A Letter

By ABRAHAM LINCOLN

IN REPLY TO AN INVITATION TO ADDRESS A
MEETING IN HONOR OF THE BIRTHDAY
OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

APRIL 28, 1859



WALLACE KIBBEE & SON
SAN FRANCISCO

1937

To H. L. Pierce and others:

Gentlemen: Springfield, Ill., April 6, 1859.

Your kind note inviting me to attend a festival in Boston, on the 28th instant, in honor of the birthday of Thomas Jefferson, was duly received. My engagements are such that I cannot attend.

Bearing in mind that about seventy years ago two great political parties were first formed in this country, that Thomas Jefferson was the head of one of them and Boston the headquarters of the other, it is both curious and interesting that those supposed to descend politically from the party opposed to Jefferson should now be celebrating his birthday in their own original seat of empire, while those claiming political descent from him have nearly ceased to breathe his name everywhere.

Remembering too, that the Jefferson party was formed upon its supposed superior devotion to the personal rights of men, holding the rights of property to be secondary only, and greatly inferior, and assuming that the so-called Democracy of to-day are the Jefferson, and their opponents the anti-Jefferson, party, it will be equally interesting to note how completely the two have changed hands as to the principle upon which they were origi-

nally supposed to be divided. The Democracy of today hold the liberty of one man to be absolutely nothing, when in conflict with another man's right of property; Republicans, on the contrary, are for both the man and the dollar, but in case of conflict the man before the dollar.

I remember being once much amused at seeing two partially intoxicated men engaged in a fight with their great-coats on, which fight, after a long and rather harmless contest, ended in each having fought himself out of his own coat and into that of the other. If the two leading parties of this day are really identical with the two in the days of Jefferson and Adams, they have performed the same feat as the two drunken men.

But soberly, it is now no child's play to save the principles of Jefferson from total overthrow in this nation. One would state with great confidence that he could convince any sane child that the simpler propositions of Euclid are true; but nevertheless he would fail, utterly, with one who should deny the definitions and axioms. The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society. And yet they are denied and evaded, with no small show of success. One dashinglly calls them "glittering generalities." Another bluntly

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calls them "self-evident lies." And others insidiously argue that they apply to "superior races." These expressions, differing in form, are identical in object and effect – the supplanting of the principles of free government, and restoring those of classification, caste and legitimacy. They would delight a convocation of crowned heads plotting against the people. They are the vanguard, the miners and sappers, of returning despotism. We must repulse them, or they will subjugate us. This is a world of compensation; and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves and, under a just God, cannot long retain it.

All honor to Jefferson – to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a mere revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there that today and in all coming days it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.

Your obedient servant,

A. LINCOLN.

IN THE DOMAIN OF LITERATURE the dead leaves of politics are carried swiftly by the tide of times to a merciful and merited oblivion. But the evergreens – the utterances of true men – remain, and their leaves are kept, as the old saying has it, for the healing of the nations. These men, we say, knew and therefore spoke; their message is for all men and for all times and places; and among the greatest of these were Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson. Lincoln, in this letter to Pierce and others, describes in his characteristic way a phenomenon associated with party politics that is almost as old as sin itself: the turning of the coat. It is the whirligig of time bringing in its revenges: Gladstone the Conservative becoming the grand old man of Liberalism; Disraeli the Radical becoming the idol of Conservatism; the anarchist of yesterday becoming the ruthless dictator of today; and armies of lesser men, for a handful of silver, a riband, or the privilege of wearing a top hat, turning their political coats as gracefully and with as little reason as did the drunken men that amused Lincoln. Wise men know that at bottom a party name is an empty shibboleth, for the hair that divides the false and the true in the realm of opinion is not always perceptible to free minds. As Lincoln honored Jefferson so would we of today honor them by our loyalty to the ideal for which they fought: a free society of autonomous minds, safeguarded from despotism and oppression by its sense of justice and its recognition of the nobility of the individual. And men of honor, with such a heritage, will not be satisfied with less.

“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

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